



COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO



SHARP Mesa Vista
Hospital

NEWS RELEASE

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CONTACT: José A. Álvarez (619) 515-6635

SHINING A LIGHT ON MENTAL ILLNESS

County and Partners Stage Anti-Stigma Demonstration and Flashlight Vigil

Lisa Jungnitsch was so excited to learn that mental health consumers were being asked to create panels for a mental health quilt, she decided to design not one but three; all depicting flowers in different budding stages.

"I feel like my recovery is starting to bloom," said Jungnitsch, who was diagnosed with depression, bipolar disorder, and post traumatic stress disorder after the 2003 fires.

Jungnitsch's three panels and 232 others were used to create the Mental Health Awareness Quilt. The 7 feet wide by 9 ½ feet long quilt was unveiled at yesterday's anti-stigma demonstration and flashlight vigil held at the Spreckels Organ Pavilion in Balboa Park. The event, the culmination of Mental Health Awareness Month activities, was sponsored by the County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency's (HHSA) Mental Health Services, The Meeting Place, Inc., and Sharp HealthCare.

Jungnitsch joined County Mental Health Services officials and more than 150 community members and mental health consumers to share how they have been affected by mental illness and stigma. Special guest Kitty Dukakis, author and wife of former presidential candidate Michael Dukakis, talked about how she has managed her constant battle with depression.



"People are uneducated about mental illnesses and don't really understand what we are going through," said Jungnitsch.

Participants also aimed their flashlights at giant posters with phrases such as "Stigma Hurts," "End Stigma Now" and "One in Five," indicating that one out of every five Americans is diagnosed with a mental disorder every year.

Efren Rivas, another mental health consumer, wants people to know that mental illness is more common than they think. A key element in his quilt panel was the phrase "1 in 5."

HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES AGENCY
1700 PACIFIC HIGHWAY, ROOM 207 • SAN DIEGO, CA 92101-2472



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Rivas has been diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder (symptoms of both a depressive disorder and schizophrenia at the same time or symptoms of schizophrenia without mood symptoms) and is seeing a psychiatrist. "I want people to know that we have feelings, that we are sensitive. I want the stigma to end."

A mental illness is a disease that causes mild to severe disturbances in thought and/or behavior, resulting in an inability to cope with life's ordinary demands and routines. There are more than 200 classified forms of mental illness, including depression, bipolar disorder, dementia, schizophrenia and anxiety disorders. Symptoms may include changes in mood, personality, personal habits and/or social withdrawal.

The stigma associated with mental illness is one of the main reasons people don't seek help.

"The fear of rejection and discrimination prevents people with a mental illness from getting access to needed mental health services. Events such as these are helping change the way people with a mental illness are viewed," said Alfredo Aguirre, Director of HHSA's Mental Health Services division. "We want to remind people that they are not alone. We are here to help."



Stigma of mental illness hurts.

Kathi Lencioni, CEO of Sharp Mesa Vista/Sharp Vista Pacifica Hospitals knows from professional experience that with "proper care and treatment people learn to cope or recover from a mental illness or emotional disorder." Sharp Mesa Vista Hospital, San Diego's largest mental health hospital, is successful in caring for approximately 9,800 admissions to their inpatient and outpatient treatment programs each year.

Sharron Hedenkamp, Executive Director of The Meeting Place, Inc., a club house for people with a mental illness, came up with the idea of using flashlights, rather than candles, at the anti-stigma demonstration.

"We're shining a light on mental illness and making a statement that the stigma should end," said Hedenkamp.

Mental Health Services provides a vast array of services including mental health assessments; individual, family, and group therapy; special services for children; crisis intervention and psychiatric emergency care. The County also provides a 24-hour, multi-lingual Access and Crisis Line at (800) 479-3339.

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